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# A VISIT TO Mexico

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# A Visit to Mexico

BY H. P. MYERS

**A**CROSS the Rio Grande lies Mexico—that sister republic about which most of us in the United States know but little. Never have I been more impressed with anything than I was with this fact when I made a visit to Mexico in the summer of 1939. How little we in the States know of this charming land and its people! Yet just a few days' journey by motor will take one into the heart of this country and give him a view of the land and an appreciation of its people that he will never forget.

I went to Mexico upon invitation of Bishop Eleazar Guerra, superintendent of the Methodist Church of Mexico, to learn of the land and its people and to visit with the Bishop some of the Methodist work under his care. As you know, the autonomous Church was set up in 1930, and Bishop Guerra is at the head of all Methodist work in the country.

## Topography of Mexico

Before entering Mexico, let us pause to consider the topography of that country. The late Dr. George B. Winton, who spent most of his life in Mexico, gives in his book, *Mexico, Past and Present*, an unforgettable description of the country—"like a vast cornucopia with its mouth open toward the States." This is a significant figure, since it is true that much of the bounty and natural resources of Mexico has been emptied toward the United States.

Mexico is not the hot, tropical country that many of the uninformed suppose it to be. On the contrary, it is for the most part a high plateau, from 6,000 to 8,000 feet in height.

It is high and dry and cool. The tropical portion is a coastal plain which parallels the seacoast and does not extend more

than 100 miles back from the coast at any point; in most places it is much narrower.



Zarapes from Oaxaca

As for climate, Mexico claims the finest in the world. The people of Mexico City boast that their city is neither hot in summer nor cold in winter, but delightful in every season. The mean temperature does not vary far from 72 degrees the year round. In Saltillo, which is 5,200 feet

above sea level, the temperature varies no more than 20 degrees during the year, being around 72 in August, the hottest month, and 53 in December, the coldest. Within a few hours' time, one may drive in Mexico from the temperate zone down into the tropical regions and back again the same day into the temperate. On such a journey one finds all the varieties of vegetation—trees, fruits, flowers—that he would find on a trip through the United States from Canada all the way to Cuba. Most of the people of Mexico dwell upon the high plateau and here are to be found nearly all the large cities. The central plateau is high and dry and too cool for much vegetation except where it is watered. Under irrigation it is very fertile and the crops resemble the best to be found in the north temperate zone. But where there is no water, the long stretches remind one of the desert of Arizona and New Mexico.

## The People of Mexico

The legendary history of Mexico runs back to between 3000 and 2000 B.C., at which time a nomadic people, probably Mongolians, entered the valley of Mexico. Some of the pyramids in the country point to a civilization as old as that. Those early people were followed by the Mayas and others, until in the 12th century several Indian tribes from the northwest swept down into Mexico and built their capital, Tenochtitlan, in the midst of a great lake on the site of what later became the city of Mexico. These Indians were the Aztecs, who by dint



National Palace on the Eastern Side of the Zocalo, Mexico City

of courage and ability overmastered the other tribes until at the time of the Spanish invasion in 1519 the Aztecs ruled over the greater portion of Mexico. Cortez found the country peopled by a highly civilized race of men who had built palaces and temples, dug canals, and erected causeways and dikes to reach their capital city, and had constructed marvelous gardens, among them the famous "floating gardens." He was impressed with the beauty and charm of the women and the strength and vigor of the men. He found them a foe quite worthy of his steel, persistent and relentless fighters. All over the high plateau there are mounds and pyramids

that rival in size the pyramids of Egypt, and were constructed with subterranean passageways. These bear record to an advanced civilization in early Mexico, some of which antedates that of the Aztecs. Here one finds evidences that those early Mexicans loved beauty and had made good progress in the development of the arts.

From such a stock sprung the Mexican people of today. One finds them divided into three classes: First, the Creoles, who are of pure Spanish blood being descendants from the original Spaniards, and who form a minority. Second, the Mestizos, a class formed by the intermarriage of the Spaniards with the Indians; these make up the great middle class of Mexico, the largest group of her population. Third, the



A Market in Mexico

Peons, a large class composed of Indians and other native races who form a substratum group in the country—the Mexican whom we usually see in this country as the laborer.

There seems to be no race prejudice in Mexico. By intermarriage of all the races and people they seemed to have solved the “race problem.”

One is impressed with the fact that the Mexican people are

a lovable people—kind, polite, and considerate, and always willing to help a stranger. The educated are cultured and refined and all Mexicans are lovers of the beautiful. A Mexican woman may live in an adobe hut, but always you will find there some flower or other evidence of her love of beauty. The Mexican people show their artistic sense in their paintings, pottery, weaving, and handicrafts done in their homes. Also, being Latins, they are deeply religious and are expressive and emotional in their religion. Above all, they are extremely hospitable. A visit to the home of a Mexican of the better class is a delightful experience. When one looks down the street of a Mexican town, he sees not a row of homes as we see here in the States, but blank walls with barred windows and wooden doors. But if the visitor stops with the street and does not enter one of those doors, he is the loser. Crossing the threshold, the first thing that meets the eye is the patio—an inner court or garden with a fountain playing in the center and surrounded by shrubbery, trees, and flowers, and with birds singing. Here it is that the Mexican gathers his family together, and in the privacy of this patio enjoys family life. These homes may be located on the streets where automobiles are honking or peddlers are calling their wares, but the Mexican family knows nothing of this. They are shut off in the privacy of their cool and beautiful patio.

We make a grave error when we judge all Mexicans by the man we see digging ditches or working on the railroad. Most Mexicans are not like that. One cannot live in Mexico even for a few days and not fall in love with the land and its people.

### Crossing the Rio Grande

When I was ready for my visit to Mexico, Bishop Guerra met me at Laredo, Texas, and in company with two of his younger ministers we crossed the Rio Grande and entered this land of charm and romance. Just across the border the coun-

try is flat and covered with low undergrowth or much of it a desert. But the highway is modern in every respect—a long



Bridge Over Rio Grande at Laredo

straight stretch of 75 miles of macadam without a curve! It is said to be the longest stretch of straight highway in the world. The Mexican people are building a fine system of roads, and one can travel from the Rio Grande to Mexico City—300 miles—over some of the finest roads to be found anywhere. The low plain and desert did

not last long; soon mountains appeared on the horizon and we began to climb rapidly.

It is well to remember that in Mexico the distance is measured in kilometers, not miles, each kilometer being six tenths of a mile. This fact was impressed upon my mind when I glanced at the speedometer as we went merrily along and found it registering 70! Before my startled eyes it quickly ran up to 80 and when I saw it going on toward 90 I could not refrain from glancing with concern at the bishop, who was smiling serenely and seemingly enjoying this hurtling through space. I ventured to suggest that we seemed to be going rather fast and that it might be well to slow down a bit, and again glanced anxiously at the speedometer. How he laughed when he saw me! "Those are not miles you are reading there," he said, "but kilometers. We are going 80 kilometers, but only about 50 miles." With this reassurance I sat back to enjoy a marvelous journey.

### In Monterrey and Saltillo

About 200 miles from the border one comes to Monterrey,

a hustling city of 200,000 people at the foot of the high Sierras. The history of this city dates back nearly 400 years, for it was in 1560 that followers of Cortez pushed northward seeking places for settlement and established a town in the valley of the Santa Catarina River. This town, first called Ciudad de Leon, became the capital of the state of Nuevo Leon. In 1595 the name of the town was changed by the Count of Monterey, Viceroy of Mexico, to "The Metropolitan City of our Lady of Monterey." Gradually all but the last name was dropped, and somehow in the change the Mexicans added a second "r" to the name, and now it is known everywhere as Monterrey. This is a beautiful city almost surrounded by high mountains and the most important manufacturing center of Mexico. The horizon is dotted with tall smokestacks, indicating the influence of modern industrialism on this 400-year-old Mexican city.

However, we did not stop then at Monterrey, but pressed on up the mountain until we reached the plateau and came



**Social Center, Monterrey**

to the attractive little city of Saltillo, a climb of 5,000 feet in 60 miles. This city is in the state of Coahuila, and our own states of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and parts of Colorado, Arkansas, and Louisiana, once formed a part of this great state in Mexico. Saltillo is a city of 60,000 founded in 1575 on a tableland surrounded by towering mountains.

It is approached through a long, shady lane formed of salt cedar trees. After our evening meal in a beautiful hotel dining room that looked out upon a patio with fountain and flowers and a tiled floor, we went on to Centro Social Roberts, which occupies an entire block north of one of the finest parks

in Mexico—the Alameda. This social center maintained by the Woman's Section of the Board of Missions of the former Methodist Episcopal Church, South, for the young women of the city, is doing a fine work in connection with the Methodist church and its pastor. Two very attractive Mexican girls are in training for the work of deaconess in the Methodist Church, and the faithful Methodist workers there are rendering a fine service in affording a place for recreation and study for many young people, who otherwise would have no opportunity to come in contact with evangelical Christianity.

Saltillo stands out in my mind as the place where I delivered my first sermon with the aid of an interpreter—not



Methodist Church at Saltillo

and there was a large choir made up of attractive young people. There were two addresses of welcome and two district superintendents sat in the pulpit. I shall not soon forget my experience with the cordial Methodist people of Monterrey.

### A Visit to Laurens Institute

While in Monterrey, I visited Laurens Institute, an educational institution founded in 1885 by the Methodists of the Virginia Conference and supported in part by the children

nearly so difficult a thing as I had imagined. The people were most attentive; I had an excellent interpreter and a good service.

Back to Monterrey we went that evening, where we had services in the Monterrey Methodist Church with the bishop himself acting as interpreter. The large auditorium was filled with people

of the Rosebud Missionary Society of that conference. We have not done a better piece of work anywhere in Mexico than the founding of this Christian school, where many leaders, both clerical and lay, have been trained through the years.

For twenty-one years we have been fortunate in having that fine Christian gentleman, Prof. Luz Marroquin, to serve as its director. He enjoys the esteem of all who know him and is honored by leaders of church and



Main Building of Laurens Institute

state alike. He is making a definite contribution to the work of training a Christian leadership for his people. Although there are restrictions placed by the government upon church schools and the teaching of religion, yet Prof. Marro-

quin and his faculty of national Christians are teaching it through the lives they are living and the positive Christian atmosphere they are creating in the school. It is significant that Laurens is crowded to the doors with children and youth, eager for an education. Even as far south as Mexico City I heard people talking about the influence and fine work of our school at Monterrey. The work at Laurens is typical of the work that both the northern and



Children at Laurens Institute

fluence and fine work of our school at Monterrey. The work at Laurens is typical of the work that both the northern and

southern branches of the Church have been doing in many similar institutions in Mexico. Although the government has placed restrictions that we regret in the field of Christian Education, yet much of definite value is being accomplished by our Methodist schools in Mexico. There is no phase of Methodist work that needs our continued help more than our schools.



Boys' Dormitory, Laurens Institute

### On to Mexico City

After a day or two in Monterrey we set out for Mexico City, 600 miles away. Our road led us from the plateau to the coastal plain, where I saw an entirely different Mexico—a tropical jungle peopled by Indians. In many places there were vast haciendas, or plantations, with bananas, oranges, pineapples, and mangoes growing, and vast fields of sugar cane and coffee. The soil was black and very rich. In the field of agriculture there are tremendous possibilities in this section of Mexico.

One morning we stopped for breakfast at the home of Dr. Andres Osuna, who has been a faithful and devoted member of the Methodist Church through the years. He is a distinguished Mexican leader, who at one time served as minister of education for Mexico and at another as governor of one of the largest states. Dr. Osuna is very hopeful of Mexico's future and sees her headed in the right direction with a liberal policy and a ruler who will give increasing rights of freedom of worship to the people. It was interesting to know that

everything served on the breakfast table had been produced on the hacienda, even to the sugar in the coffee. Dr. Osuna also has a beautiful home in the city of Monterrey.



**Home of Dr. Osuna in Monterrey**

on to the plateau, a highway with no dangerous curves, though over some of the most difficult terrain through which a road was ever constructed. There are 3,111 *reverse* curves in the drive and our car ascended over 7,000 feet in 150 miles. Far below we could see the green, shining Moctezuma River flow-

After a drive of several hundred miles along the coastal plain, we turned toward the west, and there opened before us one of the most notable drives to be found anywhere. For 150 miles the road leads over the high Sierras and



**The Two Volcanoes, Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl. Cortez Led His Army on a Route Between These Mountains**

ing between banks covered with tropical vegetation, while the snow-capped peaks towered above, and around us lay the temperate zone. We were actually in three geographical zones simultaneously.

Mexico City! The traveler does not really appreciate Mexico until he comes to the capital city, situated in a great valley and surrounded by lofty mountains and in the midst of beautiful lakes. The original city in the days of the Aztecs was on an island in a large lake and the highways were canals and waterways. The city was reached by three dikes or causeways, built of stone and mortar with a series of drawbridges to protect the ancient city from invasion. The Spaniards marveled at the beauty of this city and the American soldiers under General Scott in 1847 were deeply impressed with the location of the Mexican capital. Here today one finds two cities—the old and the new. The old city is full of historic spots, such as the Zocalo, or central plaza, that in the days of Cortez and Moctezuma flowed deep in blood, the museum, formerly Chapultepec Castle, and the National Palace which stands on the spot of the ancient palace of the Aztecs and which later served as the home of the Spanish viceroys and

of the ill-fated Maximilian and Carlotta, and of the Presidents of the Republic of Mexico. Facing the Zocalo on the north is the Cathedral, begun in 1573 and completed after 240 years. It is considered one of the most imposing religious edifices on the North American continent. A cathedral or a church is the central point in all



The Zocalo with Cathedral in Background

the towns and cities of Mexico. You cannot go into the smallest village and not find a cathedral that overpowers everything else in the whole section. They are nearly always handsome structures and often much gold is used in finishing the interior

and even precious jewels. These were built by fees, by payment of indulgences and by deathbed gifts on the part of an impoverished people.

### **Mexico's Problems**

Just as the church is the most important building in every Mexican town and city, so the problem of the church is one of the chief problems of Mexico. The Roman Catholic Church came to Mexico along with the Spanish conquest. In Old Spain Catholicism had enjoyed unusual privileges since it was the state religion, but in New Spain its privileges became wider and greater. To the church lords were given vast tracts of country in order that they might convert the Indians and bring them into the church. They took full control of the land and the Mexican people became simply serfs to the overlords of the church and state. The church thus came into great possessions and for 300 years continued to grow richer and richer. By the time Mexico became independent in 1820, the church had come into possession of one-third of all the real estate of the country and controlled one-half of all the property of Mexico, which was, of course, tax free. The church at this time was far more wealthy than the government itself.

Another privilege enjoyed by the church was that of holding its own tribunals, which resulted in many injustices and inequalities under the law.

Such was the Church as Mexico knew it 100 years ago—a church that grew rich and fat as the people grew poor. The Church had control of the education of the country, but great masses of the people were ignorant and illiterate. The Church opposed democratic institutions, education by the state, liberty of worship and labor reforms. It was against such a Church as this that the Mexicans were revolting when they passed the Reform Laws in 1859 under the guidance of Benito Juarez, called the “George Washington of Mexico,” whereby the government took over the property held by the Church. In the

new constitution of 1917 these laws were strengthened and the church leaders were swept out of politics and their teaching functions rigidly restrained. One must have this clearly in mind if he would have sympathetic understanding of the restrictions now placed upon the Church and religious leaders of all creeds in Mexico. It was a revolt against the Church as Mexico had known it in the past.

The masses of the people still know little or nothing of true and vital Christianity, and worship at a shrine in Mexico is utterly different from worship as we know it. One has only to visit the Shrine of Guadalupe just outside Mexico City to see this for himself. This shrine is considered the mecca of all Catholic worshippers, and it is said that people crawl on



Museum of Chapultepec, Former Palace of Emperor Maximilian

hands and knees for miles on their journey to the shrine. I myself saw them crawling along the street and into the church and down the aisle. They were so deeply in earnest that I turned away with a heavy heart to think that after 2,000 years people were so ignorant of vital Christianity and of the "abundant life" that Christ came to bring.

Another great problem in Mexico is the land problem. This began many years ago under the Spanish regime when grants of land were given to the privileged classes. The poor, ignorant Indians who lived on the land became serfs of these overlords. After the independence of Mexico in 1820, the government began the policy of trying to restore

some of the land to the people, a policy which was re-affirmed in the constitutions of 1857 and 1917. President Cardenas, prompted by love of the poor man, is making an effort to carry out these laws and to turn back to the people land held by the church and the privileged classes and to give to each man a small tract of land upon which he shall grow food for his family. The underlying idea is to make Mexican resources available to the rank and file of the people of Mexico. The expropriation of oil properties is a part of the same policy.



Primitive Farming Methods

Some people call this communism, but Cardenas emphatically denies this. Much could be said about the land problem as it is very acute and perhaps one of the greatest questions Mexico has ever confronted.

### Methodism in Mexico

Protestantism entered Mexico not long after the declaration for religious liberty, the Methodist Church being one of the first to come in, about 1870. The Methodist Episcopal Church worked in the southern part of the country with Mexico City as its headquarters, while the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, concentrated its efforts in the northern, or "frontier" conference. Since 1930 the Methodist Church of Mexico has enjoyed autonomy in the administration of its affairs and has shown marked evidences of growth. Today there are two annual conferences with 248 churches and 100 pastors, a total church membership of 10,000 and a constituency conservatively estimated at 20,000. Last year they raised 130,000



A Group of Mexican Methodist Leaders

leadership. In Bishop Guerra, who was elected to serve as superintendent of the work until 1942, the Church has a vigorous leader, one trained at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, and who has an intelligent grasp of the situation that confronts Protestantism in his country. Young in years, strong in body, willing and devoted in spirit, he is absolutely consecrated to the task committed to him and the Church is safe in his hands. Associated with him is a fine group of younger men, who are for the most part well trained and prepared for their work. I met with the Bishop and his entire cabinet, and on another occasion with a group of clerical and lay leaders, and I was greatly heartened for the future of the Church when I looked into their earnest faces and came to know something of their devotion to their task, many times at great sacrifice to themselves.

While the young Methodist Church of Mexico has many needs, the one that impressed me most was the need for new and trained leaders. Many of the leaders are growing old and cannot continue with the work much longer. Under the present laws we cannot send evangelistic missionaries into this land, and the Church is for that reason deprived of the help that we usually give mission fields and must depend on its own

pesos or about \$26,000 for all purposes, and there are now six new churches in the course of construction.

Although the work is hindered to some extent by the civil laws, which in reality were not aimed at Protestantism at all, yet the Methodists of Mexico have developed a strong church and a capable, courageous

leadership. The best opportunity that we have is to help them train these national leaders.



**Bishop Guerra, Center Front, and Cabinet**

the former Methodist Episcopal Church, South (General Section), in Mexico today. Associated with him is Prof. V. Mendoza, one of the outstanding Mexican leaders, splendidly equipped and trained, who works for the small sum of \$500 a year, American money. He is glad to make such a sacrifice because of his interest and belief in the need of a trained ministry. This indicates something of the heroism that characterizes our Methodist leaders in Mexico. Many of these men have a good case of old-fashioned religion and are serving from the sheer joy that comes through sacrificial service.

Here is our opportunity in Mexico as I see it—to help them to help themselves. After all, is it not better to train a man to preach the gospel to his own people than it is to send a missionary to them from a foreign country?

I have tried to take you with me on my visit to Mexico so that you may do as I did—see with your own eyes the needs of the people on this one of our mission fields and realize how eager they are to hear and accept the gospel. Mexico needs the gospel as few countries in the world today—she must have the gospel if she is to find a solution for her problems. Mexico is calling to us for help. What shall our answer be?

